

## THE PYRAMID AND THE EYE: AMERICA IN MODERN HISTORY

By George H. Nash

**Editor's Preview:** Democratic capitalism is the most modern political and economic system known to man, states historian George Nash. America's embodiment of this ideal long made her the hope of the future to much of the world. Why has that hope faded?

The Founders' bold design to replace Old World tyrannies with a "new order of the ages" based on liberty, Nash says, led them to place an unfinished pyramid on the Great Seal. But he also sees, in the divine eye depicted above the pyramid, early Americans' reverence for the eternal God who must "favor our undertakings" if we are to prosper.

Now the eye seems forgotten. The vigorous modernity that built America is scorned as old-fashioned by an adversary culture of "new moderns," who chase totalitarian utopias and nihilist fads.

The sickness will be cured only by tempering the modern in political economy with the timeless in moral and spiritual values—by looking again to the eye on the Seal.

George Nash argues that conservatives can help lead this renewal, if they remember that even an imperfect liberty is far better than the alternative.

**From the days** of the Puritans to the age of Ronald Reagan, a sense of uniqueness and of destiny has infused the American character. On board the ship *Arbella* as it sailed for New England in 1630, John Winthrop admonished his Puritan brethren: "...we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us..." A century and a half later Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a Frenchman who had settled in New York, propounded in a classic little book a famous question: "What then is the American, this new man?" And he prophesied: "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose



labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."

On the back of our one-dollar bill you find a replication of the Great Seal of the United States. One side of the seal features a majestic bald eagle holding arrows and an olive branch in its talons. The reverse side of the seal is less familiar—and more revealing. It shows an unfinished pyramid with the date 1776 engraved in Roman numerals on its base. Below the pyramid is a motto: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*—"A New Order of the Ages."

Adopted by the Continental Congress in 1782, the Great Seal of the United States symbolized America's self-image as it embarked upon nationhood. America, the seal suggested, was not simply another nation-state; it represented something novel in all history. Moreover, it portended the future—"a new order of the ages," a break with the past.

The Old World, with its kings, oligarchies, and

im•pri•mis (im-pry-mis) adv. In the first place, from Latin *in primis*, among the first things...

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regimes of oppression, was to be left behind forever. Now, in a vast and nearly empty land, there would be constructed a republic—"conceived in liberty," as Lincoln later put it, and dedicated to—to what? To a *proposition*, a creed, a set of truths held to be self-evident. America was to be a polity created by conscious design, an unprecedented experiment in self-government on a continental scale.

### Land of Opportunity

In other ways than the political, America has long been perceived as an untraditional society. To millions upon millions of immigrants through decade after decade of our history, America has been a land of opportunity, a refuge from the constricted, decadent, stratified, class-bound, traditional societies of Europe. Is it surprising that during our Civil War the British aristocracy was sympathetic to the "feudal" South, while the British working classes favored the more "modern" North? And America has beckoned precisely because it appeared to be *different* from the Old World.

What has it promised? It has promised freedom: free land, upward mobility, equality of opportunity, a chance to start over. It has been a land of stupendous social energy, a land wherein has flourished, as in no other society before or since, the social type known as the self-made man.

Benjamin Franklin is said to have remarked that America is a country where we ask of a person not "Who is he?" but "What can he do?". Think about that; it is a profound observation. In our commitment to a society based on individual merit and equality of opportunity we Americans have adopted two of the core values of modernity.

### About George Nash

George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, published in the mid-1970s, helped solidify the forces that later put Ronald Reagan in the White House. He is now writing a definitive scholarly biography of one of Reagan's most conservative predecessors, Volume I, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer*, was published in March 1983.

Dr. Nash received his B.A. degree from Amherst and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard. He has authored 22 publications, is a contributor to *National Review*, and serves as an editorial advisor to *Modern Age*.

He delivered this paper at Hillsdale on February 2, 1983, during the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar entitled: "America Confronts Modernization: A Conservative View of the American Heritage."

Still another way in which America has exhibited its modernity is in its dedication as a society to progress—or, to use a better word, to "improvement." Implanted deep in the American psyche is a conviction that social conditions around us *do not have to be that way*—that if evils exist we can eradicate them; that if, for example, corrupt politicians hold office we can throw the rascals out; that we are the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls. Passivity and fatalism are not a part of our national character.

This relentless American impulse for improvement—of society and of oneself—has taken the most various forms. Think of the extraordinary edifice of higher education that Americans in two centuries have established: from small liberal arts colleges like Hillsdale to behemoth universities. Think of the assumptions about human nature behind this commitment, and think also about its expansiveness: Americans increasingly seek education not just for a privileged elite but for ever broader segments of the population. A far higher percentage of Americans attends college, for example, than in any other country in the world.

### 'Born to Be a Reformer'

And consider this: has there ever been a society as incessantly productive of reform movements as our own? I refer not only to such preeminent crusades as those for emancipation of the slaves, universal suffrage, and regulation of the trusts, but also to such causes as temperance, prison reform, aid to the Indians, the creation of orphanages, abolition of child labor, even the health food movement.

"What is man born for but to be a Reformer...?" wrote that enormously popular American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. We are a restless people, and many of us believe that even our inner selves can be re-formed. It is a remarkably modern notion.

From Eli Whitney to Thomas Edison, from Henry Ford to Charles Lindbergh, from the Wright brothers to the astronauts, from the automobile to the home computer; no other society, to my knowledge, has honored science—above all, applied science—as lavishly as has ours.

This interest in technology, in gadgetry, in shaping and reshaping our environment, reflects another aspect of the modern temperament. We Americans like to think of ourselves as an optimistic, problem-solving people. During the election campaign of 1980, Ronald Reagan repeatedly denounced the drab, defeatist notion that America's challenges were insuperable, that our expectations must be lowered forever, that the "era of limits" had arrived. It was a theme that was persuasive with millions. In his inaugural address Mr. Reagan declared:

The crisis we are facing today [requires] our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds; to believe that

together, with God's help, we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us. And after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans.

It is a significant datum that in our discourse we speak of something called the American Dream. No one ever talks about the British Dream, the Russian Dream, or the Japanese Dream. But the American Dream—that is something else. Instinctively we comprehend what it means: it means opportunity to achieve, to ascend the ladder, to transcend our origins, however humble. We sense that this is distinctively an *American* dream, that it is inextricably interwoven with our self-definition as a people. We sense further that ours is a land where dreams often enough, find fulfillment, and that our society is unusual because of it.

economic freedom, and the breakdown of class barriers; if it means equality of opportunity, increased popular participation in politics, and equal justice under law; if it means a social order that is not static and hierarchial but dynamic and future-oriented; if it means technological innovation and a spirit of improvement; then America for two hundred years—at least in its own self-understanding—has been a modernizing society.

"The most potent force in society," Herbert Hoover once reminded us, "is its ideals." From the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth, the dominant American ideal has been (to use a current term) "democratic capitalism." And in the long perspective of Western history, democratic capitalism has been a virtual synonym for modernization.



### America the Trailblazer

This belief in American uniqueness and destiny, in America as a trailblazing society, is not the sole property of the Left. Consider this quotation:

It was not because it was proposed to establish a nation, but because it was proposed to establish a nation on new principles, that July 4, 1776 has come to be regarded as one of the greatest days in history.

Who said this? Tom Paine? William O. Douglas? No; it was Calvin Coolidge in 1926. Now consider these words:

By a classless America our forefathers meant far more than a sociological expression. There were to be no stratifications in life that handicapped the rise of any boy from the bottom to the top. The human particles should move freely in the social solution.... This idea of a fluid classless society was unique in the world. It was the point at which our social structure departed from all others.

Who wrote this paean to a classless America? Hubert Humphrey? Eugene Debs? Jane Fonda? No; it was Herbert Hoover in 1940.

America is different; it represents youth, freedom, energy, the future—a better future: this is a vision that has been central to our national identity.

The title of this CCA seminar is "America Confronts Modernization." Now if, as the social scientists tell us, the process of modernization entails social mobility,

### New Order Now Old Hat?

Yet if America in many respects is a modern society (as I have used the term thus far), we must now examine an unsettling fact: that for more than half a century the identification of America with the future of mankind has been declining

No longer, it seems, is America perceived as the harbinger of the new order of the ages. Instead today, over much of the earth, the inspiring ideals of the American experiment—the ideals of political equality and participation, of entrepreneurial freedom and economic growth, of social fluidity and equality of opportunity—are scorned, despised, and mocked.

Why has the American system lost its idealistic appeal as a model for other new nations? Some, I suppose, would claim that this was inevitable: that America, the nation of youth, has finally become middle-aged. Some would argue that America's sense of uniqueness was always a function of geographical isolation and that as America's isolation has disappeared, it has lost its immunity from the Old World and its ills. No longer, they would say, is America exempt from the disillusionments of history. Still other observers would point to America's racial problems, political corruption, unemployment, or environmental pollution and claim that the United States is no longer a success story, hence not a model for anybody.

These explanations have some plausibility, but they are not sufficient. For what has occurred in the past fifty or sixty years is not simply the discovery of an alleged



gap between American ideals and American reality but a growing and massive rebellion against the ideals themselves.

To an influential number of American and European intellectuals in this century, other societies have supplanted America as the repositories of progress and modernity.

### Political Pilgrims

Just after World War I, the eminent muckraking journalist, Lincoln Steffens, declared, "I have been over into the future—and it works." He was not referring to his own United States but to Russia. For him and so many others, Communist Russia had come to portend the beneficent next phase in the evolution of mankind.

Lincoln Steffens was but an early example of one of the most extraordinary phenomena of the twentieth century: the rise of what Paul Hollander has called "political pilgrims"—deeply alienated Western intellectuals, many of them quite famous, who have repudiated their own societies, traveled to horribly repressive totalitarian regimes, and found therein the drawings of utopia.

Over the years, the particular earthly avatar of the new age has varied. In the 1920s and 1930s it was Soviet Russia; later it was Cuba and Maoist China, Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, and Chile under Salvador Allende. But always it was somewhere else—never America. And always it was totalitarian regime.

This profound inner defection of many of the West's most distinguished intellectuals from the American ethos of democratic capitalism is one of the most stunning and disturbing features of our time. It is a phenomenon, of course, that has many roots; but clearly it is linked to the rise, within the last century or so, of a new conception of modernity.

Unlike the modernizing principles to which I have referred earlier, this "new modernity" (as I shall call it) has not been primarily political or economic in its orientation. It has been, at bottom, literary, aesthetic, and, in a way, spiritual.

The pioneers of this new consciousness are familiar enough to us all: names like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre; Isben, Gide and Baudelaire; Pound, Picasso, and the early Albert Camus.

### Relativism, Negation, Despair

At the heart of this new modernity was a sense of relativism, negation, and despair. Where the old modernity asserted that certain truths were self-evident, the new modernity denied that universal truths exist.

Where the old modernity was bourgeois, the new modernity was bohemian, contemptuous of bourgeois culture.

Where the old modernity tended to be optimistic (after all, would not tomorrow be better than today?), the new modernity was not.

Where the old modernity tended to be rationalistic, the new modernity explored the irrational and the absurd.

Where the old modernity offered liberation from *external* constraints—from the barriers of class, race, national origin, and arbitrary government—the new modernity preached liberation from *inner* constraints—from traditional morality, from artistic convention, from rationality itself.

Where the old modernity concentrated on getting ahead in the world and was relatively indifferent to questions of ultimate meaning, the new modernity was haunted by the conviction that life *has* no ultimate meaning; that God is dead.

This new modernity has penetrated very deeply into our civilization. It has become the *weltanschauung* of what Lionel Trilling has labeled the "adversary culture," a culture profoundly hostile to the old modernity and to the regime built in part upon it. How is it that this counter-culture (to use another term for it) has become so pervasive? Writing more than a dozen years ago, Jeffrey Hart offered an answer. America in the past generation, he wrote, has witnessed a "cultural explosion":

...paperbacks, Eliot reading his poems to fifty thousand students in a Midwestern football stadium, LP records, Mailer and Genet and de Sade appearing in mass circulation journals, the op-art and pop-art and porno phenomena. All of these things, along with affluence, the GI Bill and the assumption, implicit in democratic theory and increasingly the premise of government action, that absolutely everyone must go to college, have now given rise to a vast student proletariat.... Much of this proletariat absorbs the attitudes of the adversary culture.

Looking back on my own education I can attest to the acuity of Professor Hart's remark. Attending college in the Sixties, I was exposed to books like Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* and Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death*, to plays like *Waiting for Godot* and the *Marat/Sade*. Teaching at Harvard in the early Seventies, I had a student tell me one day that all values are without rational foundation, that one can only choose arbitrarily among them. This was pure existentialism, of course, but where had he acquired such ideas?

### A Sense of Our Goodness

As the new modernity has percolated down through our culture, the values of the old modernity have come increasingly to seem old-fashioned. Listen to the voices that dominate our public discourse (and I do not mean

Mr. Reagan's). Listen carefully the next time someone uses the term "equality of opportunity" or "Protestant ethic" or "middle-class values" and see whether you do not detect a note of irony or disparagement.

It is significant that the political embodiment of "old-fashioned modernity" in the United States at present is the Republican party, the *conservative* party. It is in the Republican party and among people called conservatives and neoconservatives that one still hears the rhetoric of upward mobility and achievement, of liberty and democratic capitalism as the hope of all nations. The ideals of modernity—of the *old* modernity, that is—have become the property of conservatives.

But does this clash of modernities really matter? Does it matter that the new modernity has become a virtual orthodoxy among the secular intelligentsia? Does it matter that, as Midge Decter observed in a brilliant speech last year, there is spreading through our society a conviction that "nothing is worth dying for?"

Yes, it does matter, for two reasons. First, few men and women can live in a spiritual vacuum for long. If their society seems meaningless, they will in rage and frustration find or create meaning somewhere, even in violence, decadence, and revolution. Second, no society can survive without some sense of its own goodness. If many Americans no longer believe in our system, there are others in this world who believe in theirs—and are willing to enforce their beliefs at gunpoint.

Now is there a historical relationship between the two modernities? I have presented them as antagonists, but could there be some dialectical process by which the one inexorably gave birth to the other? Is there, in other words, an inevitable declension from democratic capitalism to socialist nihilism? There is a verse by Goldsmith that my New England ancestors used to recite:

Ill fares the land  
To hastening ills a prey  
Where wealth accumulates  
And men decay.

More recently, Joseph Schumpeter, Daniel Bell, and others have suggested that capitalism creates the intellectual class that will ultimately destroy it—indeed, that capitalism generates its own fatal "cultural contradictions": that capitalism, with its ceaseless incitements to instant gratification of every taste, no matter how debased, eventually destroys the cultural matrix of decency, sobriety, and self-restraint upon which it—and republican self-government—depend.

### Under God's Eye

Is this thesis true? Is the new modernity the necessary offspring of the old? In short, is the American way of life, in some ways a modern way of life, inherently and irremediably flawed?

I do not believe that it is. The Great Seal of the United States contains more than simply the motto *Novus Ordo Seclorum* and the image of an unfinished pyramid. Hovering above the pyramid is a symbolic unblinking eye: the eye of God. And placed above that is another Latin motto. *Annuit Coeptis*, meaning "He has favored [our] undertaking." Americans, I said earlier, are a restless people, but as Tocqueville long ago recognized, we have not been restless in everything, particularly in the realm of our formative philosophic and moral beliefs. And a powerful reason for this remarkable constancy amidst so much flux is that America, from the beginning, has evolved within a context of Christian religious faith.

I am not saying that the Founding Fathers sought to establish a Christian commonwealth or that America's public institutions have been explicitly religious in character. I am saying that the modernizing impulses described earlier—the impulses of what I have called the old modernity—have operated, at least until recently, within a predominantly and persistently religious culture.

If the new modernity has not yet triumphed among us, it is because American culture has been molded and guided by the non-modern and profoundly civilizing force of our Judeo-Christian religious heritage. While the American polity and economy are in some sense modern, American culture—at the level of ultimate beliefs about God and man—has been and perhaps remains primarily conservative.

Liberty, said Alexis de Tocqueville, "cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith." If America is to survive, its indisputably modern elements, it seems to me, must be cojoined with what Russell Kirk has called the "permanent things," spiritual things, and the institutions that sustain them. Without this fusion, the American experiment may fail—not because it is a regime of liberty but because liberty alone cannot instruct us how to live. It is what we do with our liberty that will determine our own and our country's future, and for that guidance we must turn outside the market place and the polling booth.

### Transcendent Sources

If the old modernity is not to succumb to the relativism and anti-religious nihilism of the new, it will have to draw on transcendent, pre-modern sources—on religious faith—to infuse our lives with meaning. Edmund Burke said it so well:

Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

It is the duty of conservatives—even while accepting



and celebrating the ideals of the old modernity—to forge the internal checks and balances that will channel those ideals toward the permanent things.

I do not think that this will be easy. Still, if any of you are tempted to say that democratic capitalism itself is not worth purifying and preserving, or to conclude that the American experiment is too modern for your taste. I would ask you to indulge in a little act of imagination.

Imagine that when you leave this room you will be arrested and perhaps tortured for unlawful assembly; in large portions of the world at this very moment, this would be your fate.

Imagine that you could not obtain employment because of a government's whim; it happened to Lech Walesa recently.

Imagine that if you could not find a job you would be expelled from the city where you are now living; this is the case in the Soviet Union every day.

Imagine that if you tried to practice your religious faith you were prohibited from going to college or

pursuing any but the most menial career. It happens all over the U.S.S.R. in 1983.

The American heritage of which we are the heirs has bequeathed to us the "blessings of liberty." Freedom—to worship, to travel, to select and change careers. Freedom—to write, to publish, to attend meetings like this. Let us not lightly disparage these blessings. Free societies are a rarity in human history, and as the Vietnamese and Cuban boat people can tell you, they have their merits still.

American conservatives, then, unless they wish to live lives of reclusive despondency, must defend and civilize, not repudiate, the free society they have inherited. It will not, as I say, be easy: at times it will entail, in Whittaker Chambers's unforgettable metaphor, "a dance along a precipice." But in a world of spreading nihilism and tyranny, American conservatives must cherish their roots and perceive their true enemies with clarity. Conservatives must combat the new modernity, not the old.

## Hillsdale Independence Case Headed for Supreme Court

The eight-year battle for educational freedom waged by Hillsdale College is bound for the U.S. Supreme Court.

The U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling last December that partially vindicated Hillsdale's steadfast refusal to sign Title IX sex discrimination compliance forms, as ordered by the former Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

However, other portions of the order continue to threaten the access of individual Hillsdale students to federal educational grants and loans. The door is ajar for future bureaucratic interference to place a Hillsdale education out of reach financially for many young people, simply because the college vocally resists the Big Brother state.

Announcing intent to petition the nation's highest court for review of the Sixth Circuit decision, Hillsdale President George Roche said the goal is "to remove the lingering shadow of government coercion from Hillsdale's independence and to clarify once and for all the rights of individual students to choose where they will go to college."

The case began in 1975, when the former HEW department asked that Hillsdale sign compliance forms with its newly promulgated Title IX regulations, despite the fact it has never been alleged that Hillsdale discriminates against women or any other group. The college refused to comply, on the principle that it should not be subject to government control since it accepts no government assistance. HEW

then sought to terminate aid to individual Hillsdale students participating in four federal loan and grant programs.

With the aid of prominent spokesmen for freedom like Ronald Reagan, Jack Kemp, and Philip Crane, and financial and moral support from thousands of Americans who share the college's dedication to truly private education, Hillsdale pursued its case through two rounds of review within HEW before petitioning the Sixth Circuit court. Along the way, a \$31 million Freedom Fund was raised from friends across the country, in order to strengthen Hillsdale's independence from government aid and to replace the threatened student assistance funds in the event the federal cutoff was upheld.

The December, 1982 court decision averted that threat for now. But President Roche explains why Hillsdale feels the fight is not over: "It is true that the Sixth Circuit ruling left us reasonable room in which to go about our business unhindered, and many would say that half a loaf is better than none. But the principles of educational freedom and individual choice are not something we define in terms of halfway measures.

"The continuing threat to the rights of our young people needs ultimate resolution. The Supreme Court petition is the only way we know to keep faith with our students, with the thousands of citizens who share our concern, and with the founding ideals of this college and this country."



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